

# UKMA News

The newsletter for members of the UK Metric Association *m*

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## UKMA & Consumer Organisations – A Personal View

*Roddy Urquhart*

Within UKMA we have been concerned about how the lack of “clean” conversion from imperial to metric has affected the consumer. While it may be hard to demonstrate unequivocally that “scams” are taking place there is certainly plenty of scope for public confusion and for mistakes as a result of our measurement muddle.

Our biggest challenge as an Association is not BWMA but the problem of inertia regarding measurement units in Britain’s political establishment, civil service, institutions and media. A major opportunity to implement a quick, holistic changeover was

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## Scottish Parties State their views on Metrication

Robin Paice

### **First Minister rejects separate metric units for Scotland, Tories want to put clock back, while SNP says it has no policy**

Jack McConnell, the Scottish First Minister, has rejected the suggestion that units of measurement should become a devolved matter within the competence of the Scottish Parliament. He also disagreed with the suggestion that a clause in the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions could be used to authorise metric road signs in Scotland.

In his reply, David McLetchie (Scottish Conservative leader) advocated “consumer choice” and called for a change in the EU Directive to permit continued use of pounds and ounces for the sale of loose goods.

Meanwhile, the Head of the SNP’s Policy Unit, Craig Milroy, admitted that, despite advocating total independence for Scotland, the Scottish National Party has no policy on the matter

Committee member, Robin Paice (who lives in

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lost in the 1970s. At that time the public was relatively open to change and the highly successful transition to decimal currency was fresh in people's minds. Regrettably, the flawed voluntary metrication approach rapidly degenerated into the desire to do as little as possible.

The damage that this has done is particularly noticeable in my generation (mid-40s). We learned imperial (with all the ugliness of imperial long division and multiplication) in primary school in the 1960s. Then, in secondary school it was a tremendous relief to abandon imperial and have metric textbooks. However, the big downer was when our generation of young adults went shopping in supermarkets or DIY stores for the first time and everything (apart from sugar) was in imperial. Thus my generation was forced to change from imperial to metric in secondary school then back again within a short space of time. Most people, having changed twice already, cannot now be bothered changing again and are not sensitive to consumer protection issues involving measurement. Our challenge is to awake perceptions on fair measurement and to demonstrate the risk of people making purchasing mistakes or getting poor value for money.

Some of us have naturally thought that consumer protection groups might sympathise with us and rise to support our cause. However, like other British institutions 'imperial versus metric' is not high on their agenda. Consumer groups – like politicians – aim to serve their supporters by fighting the battles that their supporters think are most important. As Shirley said in a recent posting "*there are many areas in which consumer members are concerned and work hard to change policy such as gas prices, telephone charges, time share fraud, dental problems and costs*". The bitter reality for us is that members of the public complain loudly about issues such as overcharging, product quality, product safety and well-documented scams such as some timeshare schemes. They do **not** complain about sharp practices like signs

Scotland) wrote on behalf of UKMA to the leaders of all the main Scottish political parties which are contesting the Scottish Parliamentary election on 1 May. Up till 27 April, only Labour, the Conservatives and the SNP had replied. The correspondence is reproduced below:

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4 April 2003

**Dear party leader**

***Party policy on completing the metric changeover***

*On behalf of the UK Metric Association (UKMA) I am writing to ask you to state the policy of the zyxzyx Party on the issue of completing the changeover from imperial to metric units of measurement in Scotland. It would be most helpful if you could answer the specific questions posed in the attached short questionnaire.*

*UKMA is an independent, non-political, single-issue organisation which advocates the full adoption of the international metric system (SI) for all official, trade, legal, contractual and other purposes in the United Kingdom. We also campaign for the use of metric units as a clear and transparent form of consumer protection.*

*As you know, all weights and measures matters (including the Weights and Measures Acts, Units of Measurement Regulations, and the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions) are reserved to the UK Parliament, and the Scottish Parliament therefore has no jurisdiction – with one minor possible exception, which is dealt with below. UKMA believes that the principle of subsidiarity should apply in this case, and that weights and measures should be a devolved matter. This would be in accordance with the UK's obligations under European law and is particularly relevant now that the UK has a land border with a country which will shortly be wholly metric (the Irish Republic). We should like to know whether the zyxzyx Party*

that say “apples only 42p per pound”. Thus we cannot expect consumer groups to do a lot for us unless either their own members ask for it or there is a clear perceived public demand.

The reality of public perception does not mean that there are not real consumer protection issues around measurement. We know that they exist – even if they are as not as blatantly obvious as say selling defective goods or fraudulent timeshare schemes – and we know that a user-friendly adoption of metric units enhances consumer protection. Four fundamental principles with respect to measurement should be followed to protect the consumer:

- ❖ Standardised usage of units of measurement to allow accurate comparison of one offering with a competitive alternative
- ❖ Properly calibrated measuring instruments at the packaging stage or point of sale as appropriate
- ❖ Standardised unit prices if appropriate
- ❖ A standardised way to represent price and measurement when labelling or advertising goods.

Our challenge therefore is to significantly increase awareness of the role that consistent measurement plays in consumer protection. In some cases increasing awareness may not be difficult. It never ceases to amaze me how few of my friends ever look at the unit pricing on a supermarket shelf label. This approach, coming originally from Sweden, came into Britain through a European directive and predictably was introduced by stealth. However, unit pricing allows fair comparison of the prices of goods packed in different sizes of container. It is also a transparent way of spotting any pricing tricks that a manufacturer may play with downsizing packages.

*supports this stance.*

*UKMA believes that the UK’s attempt to effect the metric changeover gradually and voluntarily has resulted in an expensive and inefficient muddle of two incompatible systems which satisfies nobody. We believe that after 38 years it is time to clear up this mess and to set an early date after which the UK will be wholly metric and the use of imperial measures will be officially discouraged. The detailed arguments for this policy can be read on our website at [www.metric.org.uk](http://www.metric.org.uk).*

*UKMA therefore proposes that the UK government (or Scottish Executive - in the event that the matter were devolved) should :*

- *publicly declare its support for early completion of the metric changeover*
- *be prepared to face down any opposition from misguided traditionalists*
- *Set a timetable and target dates for completion in various sectors*
- *Establish a cross-departmental authority to help manage the change*
- *Require all publicly-funded agencies and all private contractors on publicly-funded projects to work toward becoming exclusively metric*
- *Introduce any necessary legislation and ensure that it is enforced*
- *Undertake a campaign of public education and familiarisation.*

*UKMA believes that if a UK government (or Scottish Executive) had the courage and commitment to carry out this obviously desirable programme, that any initial public opposition would soon evaporate and that the current excruciatingly slow transition could be completed within the space of two to three years.*

*Finally, with regard to the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2002, I would draw your attention to Regulation 2, which reads as follows:*

*“Nothing in these Regulations shall be taken to*

So what can a small Association with 40-odd members do to address this situation? One approach would be for us to form our own independent consumer group focused on consumer measurement issues. However, it is fairly obvious that, today, we lack the resources to set ourselves up in that way. There are, nevertheless, a number of concrete steps that we can take to improve the situation:

- a) Document and publicise cases where measurement practices negatively impact the consumer
- b) Provide consumer-oriented advice and information via a separate website and
- c) Actively participate in existing consumer groups.

Firstly, we frequently hear of cases on our e-mail forum of cases of manufacturers or retailers who, in our view, provide measurements in a way that is bad for the consumer. Such cases must be documented properly and subjected to objective scrutiny. Do they represent enough evidence to show that the consumer is adversely affected? If so our friends in Parliament might have a political point they can make. Do we have a sufficiently clear-cut case that we can publicise it? Having hard evidence in the form of photos, receipts, instruction booklets, etc is invaluable.

Secondly, although I would not trivialise the amount of work involved in setting up a website it is a cost-effective way of reaching a lot of people. As we saw with Roz's turkey roasting press release at Christmas, information that is genuinely useful to the public is consumed. We need to expose bad practices and highlight good ones by showing the *benefit* to consumers. There are plenty of people who will be interested in finding out how to get better value when buying their floor coverings or groceries but who would be unlikely to be interested in the

*limit the powers of the Secretary of State, the Scottish Ministers and the National Assembly for Wales under section 64(1) and (2) of the 1984 Act ... to authorise the erection or retention of traffic signs of a character not prescribed by these Regulations."*

*This Regulation bears the interpretation that the Scottish Executive could (if it wished) authorise metric signage in Scotland either in individual cases or possibly on a general basis – independently of the rest of the UK.*

*I should be most grateful if you could clarify the position of the zxxzxx Party on these matters by responding to the attached questionnaire. Perhaps I should add that your response may be circulated to our membership – in the UK generally as well as in Scotland – and may be posted on our website.*

*I look forward to your response.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Robin Paice  
Assistant Secretary (Scotland)*

***Questionnaire to Scottish political parties:  
Completing the metric changeover***

1. *Do you favour weights and measures (including the Weights and Measures Acts, Units of Measurement Regulations, and the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions) becoming a devolved matter under the control of the Scottish Parliament?*
2. *Do you support the early completion of the changeover to exclusively metric units of measurement, including the phasing out of remaining imperial measures? (If yes, please indicate what timescale you would favour)*
3. *Do you support each of the following actions by the UK government (or Scottish Executive, as the case may be)?*
  - *Publicly declare its support for early completion of the metric changeover*

campaigning stuff that both BWMA and we put on our websites. Since a consumer-oriented website would target a different population than our main campaigning website it would need to be separate.

Last but not least we have a number of members who either have been or who are actively involved in consumer organisations. This is a low-key but effective way of raising metrication issues. Consumer organisations need activists to do their work and measurement issues will get higher up their agenda by active internal involvement. We should encourage the participation of our members in such groups – indeed we should actively seek to be influencers.

**m**

## Policy Document (formerly known as Manifesto) – progress report

*Robin Paice*

Progress since the circulation of draft 3 of sections of the Policy Document has been modest – partly because of lack of support and volunteers from the membership to help develop the draft.

### Response to consultation

In response to the consultation launched in January, individual members made three main points:

1. The “manifesto” is too long, and nobody will read it
2. UKMA should not endorse metric

- *Be prepared to face down any opposition from misguided traditionalists*
- *Set a timetable and target dates for completion in various sectors*
- *Establish a cross-departmental authority to help manage the change*
- *Require all publicly-funded agencies and all private contractors on publicly-funded projects to work toward becoming exclusively metric*
- *Introduce any necessary legislation and ensure that it is enforced*
- *Undertake a campaign of public education and familiarisation*

4. *Would you favour using Regulation 2 of the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2002 to authorise metric signage in Scotland independently of the rest of the UK – either in individual cases or generally?*
5. *Do you wish to make any other comments on the issue?*

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### SCOTTISH LABOUR

11 April 2003

*Dear Robin (sic)*

### **Party policy on completing the metric changeover**

*Thank you for your recent correspondence.*

*As you say, the matters of concern to your campaign are reserved to the Westminster Government, and are therefore not matters on which the Scottish Labour Party would take a separate view.*

*On the question of road signs, I have discussed the matter with the Depute Minister for Transport, and we are agreed that even if the regulation which you cite bore the interpretation you place upon it, it would not be appropriate to have road signs in different units of measurement in different parts of the UK.*

units which do not conform to the “convention of 1000” – that is, we should be silent on units such as the centimetre, centilitre and hectare.

3. UKMA should not advocate a “clean break” with imperial, and should accept that dual signage and transitional periods are necessary.

The Committee has discussed these points, and responds as follows:

1. Members may have been misled by the term “manifesto”. As was explained in UKMA News 1, the document is intended as a full statement of UKMA’s policy, including our arguments for change, backed up by appendices. It will thus serve as a reference document for anyone who wishes to study and understand our position (including our own members). The Executive Summary (which obviously has not yet been written) will (it is hoped) be a shorter, more punchy document and more suitable for the media and others with a short concentration-span. The document may need to be renamed in order to avoid this misunderstanding.
2. The Committee believes that where metric units such as the centimetre or hectare are already in common use and are widely understood, they should be accepted and certainly not discouraged.
3. The Committee favours the “clean break” philosophy in principle, but accepts that for pragmatic reasons some transitional arrangements may be needed (the existing draft did more or less say this).

*Yours sincerely,*

*Best wishes*

*(signed)*

*Jack McConnell*

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## **SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY**

***Dear Mr Paice***

***Metric changeover***

*Many thanks for your letter on the above which has been passed to me for reply.*

*As you point out, the majority of legislation which governs weights and measures is reserved to Westminster. The SNP argue for Independence, which would mean that the full transition to metric would be under the control of our own parliament; that the timetable for full changeover would be determined by the people of Scotland, through their representatives following a debate of the issue in Parliament in Edinburgh.*

*The SNP does not have policy on the outlawing of the use of non-metric weights and measures nor do we have policy on associated proposals to facilitate a complete changeover to the metric system.*

*However, we do believe that any route and timetable for full metrification (sic) should be a matter for the people of Scotland to decide through full and accountable public debate by our own representatives in Parliament.*

*I hope this is of assistance.*

*Yours sincerely*

*(signed)*

*Craig Milroy  
Head of SNP Policy Unit*

A number of other minor points were made which have largely been adopted in the current 4<sup>th</sup> draft.

### **Development of future drafts**

As there have been no volunteers to participate in working groups to develop specific subject areas, the Committee will attempt first drafts without such assistance and will then consult individual members who have shown particular interest or expertise in the topic under consideration. It is hoped that in this way, good progress with the draft can be made and that this can be discussed at the AGM/Annual Conference in July – with a view to launching the document later in the year. *m*

### **AGM Dates Confirmed, Conference Papers Sought**

This is to confirm that the UK Metric Association AGM and Annual Conference will take place on Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> July at 10:00.

Like last year we plan to meet at University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HY.

Once the formal business is complete we will have presentation of conference papers. If you wish to make a presentation please send a summary of up to 100 words to the Secretary.

Please try to come! *m*

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### **SCOTTISH CONSERVATIVE PARTY**

*Dear Mr Paice*

#### ***The Metric Changeover***

*Thank you for giving me the opportunity to respond to your questions on our policy regarding the issue of a changeover from imperial to metric units of measurement in Scotland. I have attached below my answers to your short questionnaire.*

*Please do contact me if you would like any further information.*

*Kind regards*

*(signed)*

*David McLetchie*

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#### **Questionnaire regarding metric changeover**

- 1. The Conservative Party is totally committed to making a success of the Scottish Parliament within the context of the United Kingdom. Our aim is to develop the relationships between the constituent parts of the United measurement Kingdom thereby strengthening the Union and ensuring that the new constitutional framework is a true partnership and works no matter which parties are in power. However, we do not wish to make any fundamental changes to the reserved and devolved matters as set out in the Scotland Act. The Scottish Parliament is only four years old and needs more time to settle into its new role within the United Kingdom constitution.*
- 2. No, we do not support the early completion of the changeover to exclusively metric units of because we are on the side of*

## UKMA Chairperson Meets Dyson

On March 10 I had lunch at the House of Lords with Lord Howe, Sir Richard Needham, and James Dyson. Sir Richard was the DTI minister during part of the Thatcher era, and is now a deputy chairman of Dyson's company.

We brought Sir Richard and Mr Dyson up to date with what the UKMA has been doing, and brought to their attention what the opposition has been doing. James Dyson was of the opinion that the change should have been done swiftly and cleanly, but that it was now too late for that. He cited an example of one of their delivery vehicles from France almost having an accident with a bridge in Wiltshire, and felt that the lack of metric signs could have been a contributory factor. Sir Richard looked at the issue of road signs with a business man's hat on, and said we would need to devise a decisive selling point, otherwise he felt that it would be doomed. He did say that he thought that, ironically, an appeal to the EU for non-implementation of the Directive in respect of road traffic was concerned might be a good idea. He said that as far as he was concerned a derogation (in whatever context) was only ever meant as a temporary measure, and was surprised that there was no specified end date for those 'exemptions'. If we can come up with a list of examples where the current situation was obviously nonsensical, then this would help sell our case.

Both Sir Richard and Mr Dyson said they would raise the issue with influential friends, but weren't too hopeful about getting support.

I did stress that our funds do not permit us to do many things that we would like (such as professional surveys, etc.) Dyson said that his board prefer to give large sums once a year to their chosen charities (mostly children's health), rather than smaller amounts throughout the year, but he would raise it with his board. To my delight, Lord Howe forwarded a cheque for £500 from Dyson a few weeks ago.

Chris

*consumer choice, small and large businesses. Whether traders choose to sell in imperial or metric units should be a matter between them and their customers. The last Conservative government secured an opt-out from the EU Directive which enforced exclusively metric units and this permitted the continued use of imperial measurements. Since these goods are for domestic sale only, there should have been no difficulty in allowing the use of pounds and ounces for loose goods to continue. We believe that the Government should call off any prosecutions and secure a change in the Directive to permit the continued use of pounds and ounces for the sale of these goods.*

3. *We do not support an early completion of the metric changeover due to the large cost to businesses of such a move at a time when they are already suffering enormous financial pressures from Labour's high taxes and regulatory burden. The British Chamber of Commerce now estimates the regulatory cost to UK businesses to be £22 billion since 1997. We do not wish to add to this with unnecessary changes to weights and measurements. However should such a change take place we would support a campaign of public and business education and familiarisation.*

*We are opposed to any change to the signage currently in Scotland, either independently or with the rest of the UK, due to the unnecessary cost and potential damage involved with regard to changes on waterways (sic)*

***m***